7. Saint Gregory Palamas' Critique of "Mind-out-of Body" in the Contemporary Purview of Michel Henry's Reversed Phenomenology

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Abstract: This paper attempts to demonstrate the contemporary interest of Saint Gregory Palamas' thinking through his critique of the "Hellenic error" that he deems characterises pagan philosophy. We propose that Michel Henry's proposal of a "reversed phenomenology" meets' Saint Gregory's hesychastic vision at vital points and brings it into current relevance.

Keywords: hesychasm, Palamas, Henry, radical phenomenology, incognito, mind-out-of-body.

The following passage from Saint Gregory Palamas' *Triads in Defence of the Holy Hesychasts* is the source of inspiration for this essay:

> "…to make the mind 'go out' not only from fleshly thoughts, but out of the body itself, with the aim of contemplating intelligible visions—that is the greatest of the Hellenic errors, the root and source of all heresies, an invention of demons, a doctrine which engenders folly and is itself the product of madness" (Palamas 1983, 44).

The immediate context for Saint Gregory's severe judgment on the source of intellectual error cultivated by the pagan Greek philosophers is his famous fourteenth-century polemics with Barlaam. Its wider context corresponds to a tradition in patristic teaching cautioning against allowing fantasy to dominate our rational faculties and direction of thought. Moreover, to take him at his word, St Gregory seems to have discerned a

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fault line in the practice of philosophy that has simply and generally been accepted as normal procedure. This he refers to as the most eminent "Hellenic error", namely making the mind 'go out' of the body with the result of producing unreal constructs.

In any event, we can attribute no intention on his part to make more of an issue of it except to deflate Barlaam's high appreciation of Greek philosophy. In that sense, like much patristic writing, *In Defence of the Holy Hesychasts*, or *The Triads*, was occasional, i.e., meant to address a specific problem and not part of systematic treatise with a life of its own. Themes and categories deployed in the argument were received from an honoured tradition and applied to suit and assimilate the particularities of new challenges. Still, in this specific case, it represents a crucial moment in the intellectual and spiritual history of the Orthodox Church. The events surrounding Barlaam's challenge to the authenticity of the hesychastic experience as one of deification and Palamas' response to it may be said to have an epical significance in how the Orthodox understand the aim of life in Christ.

In principle, Saint Gregory's teachings concerning the full scope of *theosis* is not supposed to have an optional, or facultative, status for the Orthodox. After the departure of Barlaam to Italy, and in spite of the criticisms made by Gregory Akindynos of Palamas' "innovations", the Palamite doctrine received official sanction at two councils held in Constantinople in 1347 and 1351, considered by some Orthodox to constitute the Ninth Ecumenical Council. Nevertheless, the controversy over those themes that were questioned by Barlaam persisted during his later years and after his death in 1359. Even so, in Norman Russell's words, with Saint Gregory Palamas' canonisation in 1368 the hesychastic doctrine of *theosis* became "enshrined … as the Orthodox Church's noblest expression of the content and purpose of the spiritual life" (Russell 2004, p.309). St Gregory's theological reinforcement of the validity of hesychastic experience was, and still is, feted as a triumphal moment for its confirmation of the Eastern Church's approach to the Christian faith. In fact, since the middle of the fourteenth century, his achievement continues *ad intra* to be celebrated liturgically in conjunction with the Seventh Ecumenical Council's restoration of icon veneration in 787, which was reaffirmed in the *Synodicon* of 843. The restoration of the icons came to be commemorated on the First Sunday of Great Lent as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy". The Second Sunday of Great Lent, known as "the Sunday of Saint Gregory Palamas", is informally referred to as the second triumph of Orthodoxy. It appears, thus, to have comparable import and be as distinctively an Orthodox trait as that of icon veneration. As far as the

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content of the *Synodicon* is concerned, its acclamations of "memory eternal" and "anathema", provide criteria for the particular rationality that governs Orthodox tradition.

The pertinence of citing these historical details lies in the fact that both the defence of icons and the defence of hesychasm draw on Chalcedonian convictions about the repercussion of the Incarnation, e.g., the potential of human corporal existence to be in *theosis*. In conformity with the rationale that supports icon veneration, St Gregory's advocacy of hesychasm widens the scope of the empirical knowledge of God and admits ontological complicity between the visible and the invisible.

The Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* is, historically speaking, the result of complex polemics coming from challenges by pagan, Jewish, and heretical sources with which Christian Orthodox had to contend. The intent that sustains the doctrinal effort lies in the gradual explication of the consequences derived from the Incarnation. Above all, it refers to an experiential reality: knowledge of God may be, following Dionysius, apophatic, but this in no way implies that it is impossible for human beings. The essence of God is unknowable, but His glory, as in the transformative divine light experienced by the apostles on Mount Tabor, is truly received as divine. Thus, in accordance with the distinction of Essence and Energy that Palamas advocated against Balaam, whilst divine essence is not available for human participation as such, man can engage in and know divine reality through the uncreated energies, i.e., the uncreated grace that permeates all of creation. Meaning to conform to biblical revelation and the experience of the prophets, the apostles, and the saints, this distinction accentuates absolute divine freedom in regard to creation, but allows God's uncreated glory to be seen and experienced bodily by mankind. As defined by the hesychasts, the experience consists of a divine gift in synergy with human *askesis* by which divine life manifests itself, however briefly, in the immanence of the human body.

As for Barlaam of Calabria, he came to Constantinople as an Orthodox theologian who was knowledgeable in the ways of the West. He is known to have defended the Orthodox position in relation to the *filioque* clause in the Creed and seemed initially to have the Orthodox cause at heart. However, eventually, after having seen his theses anathematised, he returned to Italy and joined the Latin Church. It would seem that his Latin mode of thinking and the barrier that he encountered when confronted with a rival form of rationality are telling factors. From an Orthodox perspective, the issue is encapsulated in the rise of Scholasticism in the Western Church. As an acute observer of the impact made by Western rationalisation in terms of its theology and philosophical justification on

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the Eastern Church, Father George Florovsky's views are worth noting.

Florovsky sees, for instance, that the progressive adoption of Scholastic modes of theology was associated with how the "Age" of the Fathers was interpreted in the two traditions. His succinct judgement on the theological quandary into which Orthodox thinking was thrown allows us to begin to see the difficulties inherent in making Palamite doctrine heard and evaluated in the West:

> "*From the Western point of view 'the Age of the Fathers' has been succeeded, and indeed superseded, by 'the Age of the Schoolmen,' which was an essential step forward.* Since the rise of Scholasticism, 'Patristic theology' has been antiquated, has become actually a 'past age', a kind of archaic prelude. This point of view, legitimate for the West, has been, most unfortunately, accepted also by many in the East, blindly and uncritically. To regret the 'backwardness' of the East which never developed any 'Scholasticism' of its own. *Or* one should retire into the 'Ancient Age', in a more or less archeological manner, and practice what has been wittily described recently as a 'theology of repetition'. The latter, in fact, is just a peculiar form of imitative 'scholasticism'" (Florovsky 1972, p.105).

Taken at face value, Florovsky's mid-twentieth century observation of the Western understanding of Scholasticism as a sign of progress vis-à-vis a Patristic Age makes it seem that Eastern Orthodoxy finds itself in a lose/lose situation.

On the one hand, patristic thinking seems backwards, because it does not adopt a more systematic and argumentative approach to theology. On the other, its recourse to the repetition of the Fathers appears to represent a poor mimetic response to more intellectualist Western practices. But, this can arguably be true only if Scholasticism indeed represents an advance and if the Byzantine fixation on the Fathers really does represent backwardness, or even worse, an *ersatz* form of Scholastic exercise through obsessive repetition. We suspect, as Florovsky maintains in his own work, that something nearly the opposite of this situation is, both philosophically and theologically, closer to the mark in relation to the apostolic faith. We also suspect that St Gregory's citing of the "Hellenic error" touches on an even more fundamental trait of pagan philosophy with lasting consequences.

The question that St Gregory raises in relation to corporality and the noetic process finds, in many ways, a consonant development in Michel Henry's "reversed" (or "radical" or "post-Husserlian") phenomenology. A thoroughly modern philosopher, Henry's approach to ontology accentuates

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the primacy of the appearance of Life as affective, instead of the exterior perceived by the senses and looked at by the mind; something akin to the Hellenic error[1]. As we shall see further on, the latter reflects, for Henry, the bias of pagan philosophy that has dictated the terms of how philosophy has been done up to the present. It is, however, suggestive that Henry traces the former back to Christian revelation, establishing, in his final works and for philosophical reasons, its most definite source of ontological intelligibility in the Incarnation, a conviction maintained in manifest complicity with the Church Fathers. In Henry's words, reflecting a central theme in Palamite doctrine: "[...] the becoming man of God grounds the becoming God of man. Christian salvation does not consist in the dispensation of particular and all-eminent graces: it consists in the *deification* of man (Henry 2000, 23)".

In *I am the Truth: Towards a Philosophy of Christianity*, *Incarnation: A Phenomenology of Flesh*, and *Words of Christ*, Henry recognises a direct thematic association between Absolute Life and the Christian God, centring his thinking on the possibility of our *capax Dei*. Working through the idea of the transcendental primacy of self-donating Absolute Life and the materiality of the Incarnation, he draws near to the hesychastic experience. We propose that his reversed phenomenology reinforces the fundamental lines of Saint Gregory's defence of the holy hesychasts and furthers, in contemporary terms, the possibilities for philosophical thought once the Hellenic error is bypassed. We shall, thus, begin with an account of the context in which Saint Gregory formulates his protest in relation to it. Then we shall see, in turn, that Henry's conjoining of the materiality of the Incarnation with the invisibility of Life itself enriches and renews the Saint's insight into the validity of the hesychastic life.

[1] Henry never claims to be anything but a philosopher, never confesses in his works an allegiance to a church body, and, thereby, does not explicitly have a specific theological stance to defend. Distinctions that would be typical in Orthodox theology's use of apophatic knowledge, divine freedom, and the distinguishing of divine essence from uncreated energies ought not to be expected in Henry's thinking. While the suggestion of divine freedom is difficult to find in it, some evidence of apophaticism and divine energies can be read into his "philosophy of Christianity". A form of these latter notions can be noted respectively in Henry's critique of referential language and in the unceasing self-donation of Life, both of which play an important part in his reversed phenomenology.

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(1) St Gregory Palamas and the Hellenic Error

(a) Greek conceptual presumptions versus Athonite experience, at once corporal and divine.

The picture given to us at the outset of St Gregory's defence of his brother hesychasts is that of a rescue mission. St Gregory portrays himself as sought out by beleaguered Athonite monks that have been made the object of ridicule by a certain philosopher, who we understand to be Barlaam. The hesychasts' practices, observed by him and judged to be spiritually unsound, were denounced in publications that were in circulation, causing considerable discomfort amongst the monastics. In the voice of a distressed monk, Palamas, as the recipient of a summary of Barlaam's critique, considers the latter's recommendations for the benighted monks. These recommendations are tantamount to a programme for their enlightenment. The scene is set for a confrontation between a Latin Scholastic confidence in philosophical reason as preparation for divine knowledge and the Eastern grounding of *theologia* on experience; both are personal, i.e., corporal, and ecclesial.

From Barlaam's perspective, "Greek culture" is "a gift of God—on equal standing as those insights granted to the prophets and apostles through revelation" (Palamas 1983, p.25). Intellectual insights are considered truly what the monks should be seeking, but they must be given proper preparatory education to cultivate the powers of the soul, especially that which deals with knowledge, and discipline it against the passions. The greater the preparation through the various sources of knowledge available to it, the greater the possibility the mind has of overcoming ignorance and false opinions in its progress to know God through the natural world. The discipline of the speculative mind is held to be paramount. Concerned for the spiritual welfare of the monks, Barlaam suggests the deployment of a procedure that is recognisably Scholastic in nature, namely, "[…] the methods of distinction, syllogistic reasoning and analysis" (Meyendorf 1964, p.126). But, can a procedure that rests on natural reasoning as exemplified by the pagan philosophers do justice to the revealed God? Herein begins St Gregory's defence, marked by apophatic caution about the mind's capacity and by the underscoring of the empirical experience of divine grace.

True, he concedes, the pagan philosophers have a certain conception of God but not one that can appreciate "His blessed nature". In fact, they actually tend to mistake demons for gods. Whatever inherent dignity philosophy has on its own, a kind of hubris is likely to set in

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whereby its natural ends are perverted. That is, it falls prey to demonic impulses that lead it to folly and contentiousness, even if they deem it wisdom:

> "[…] Greek wisdom is 'demonic', on the grounds that it arouses quarrels and contains almost every kind of false teaching, and is alienated from its proper end, that is, the knowledge of God; but at same time recognise that it may have some participation in the good in a remote and inchoate manner. It should be remembered that no evil thing is evil insofar as it exists, but insofar as it is turned aside from the activity appropriate to it, and thus from the end assigned to this activity" (Palamas 1983, p.27).

The human intellect's penchant for self-delusion feeds on pride and leads to endless and inconsequential arguments. It may conceivably express a desire to discern God in the domain of creatures and, once grasping the truth, give glory to God. This would be the natural aim of philosophy, but it operates in fact unnaturally. And how is this demonstrated?

(b) Re-directing alienated spiritual powers towards personal transformation.

When the soul's faculties are not properly guided toward divine things, they miss the mark. The misuse of the powers of the soul engenders the unruly passions, just as the misuse of knowledge of created things engenders "wisdom which has become folly" (Palamas 1983, p.27). Nevertheless, the practice of philosophy has its rightful place and, once properly ascertained, may prove useful for the wellbeing of mankind—the kind of medicine that the snake's flesh can provide. To benefit from it, like the snake, you have to kill it first. St Gregory then proceeds to elaborate on the philosophy-as-snake simile that he has advanced for its edifying potential.

To get the best out of philosophy, the source of delusion about the intelligibility of primordial principles must be removed. Philosophical pretentiousness in regard to metaphysical knowledge is equated with the head of the snake that one would do well to sever. Humility will thus take the place of pride, which, in continuance with the simile, came into the world through the auspices of a snake's word. But, along with pride, philosophy's penchant to invent "fabulous stories concerning created things" needs likewise to be dwelt with and this is likened to cutting off the snake's tail (Palamas 1983, p.29). Now, with that accomplished, what remains of philosophy might do us some good, like the medicinal qualities

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that can be extracted from the snake. Philosophy might then rightly be seen as a "gift of nature", when rightly situated in the created order.

St Gregory's lesson is clear: when the acquisition of sacred wisdom is at issue, it is not the affair of philosophers but those of pure of heart, such as the holy hesychasts. The Athonite monks neither speculate about divine things, nor did they need to have recourse to mythological explanations; through the spiritual practices of the Prayer of the Heart, they knew of the uncreated energies and the uncreated light by which they experienced, in their corporal condition, the presence of God. St Gregory grants that, before the Word became flesh, philosophy offered natural wisdom. But, the soul needed much more to bring it once again to its pristine beauty, in conformity with the divine image that inhabits it: "Do you not see that it is not the study of profane sciences which brings salvation, which purifies the cognitive faculty of the soul, and conforms it to the divine Archetype?" (Palamas 1983, p.30). That is, the purification of the intellect of pride and the tendency to create false speculative myths in such a way that it ontologically reflects the Word, through whom all things were made, is the path that leads to salvation. By themselves, the faculties of the soul of which philosophy depends and presupposes do not have within themselves the capacity to provide the conditions of spiritual wholeness.

Mystical knowledge is not, in sum, the result of the abstractive work of the intellect in full dialectical operation, but the power of the Spirit. The divine energies communicate "intellectual sensation", the origin of which is neither the intellect nor the bodily senses. Firmly rooted in Dionysian tradition, Palamas accentuates the apophatic quality of the experience as an ontological union, more like that of the saints, than knowledge, as we usually conceive it, in speculative form:

> "For at such a time man truly sees neither by the intellect nor by the body, but by the Spirit, and he knows that he sees supernaturally. […] he knows not by what organ he sees this light, nor can he search out its nature, for the Spirit through whom he sees is untraceable" (Palamas 1983, 37-38).

Feeling comes into experience, but, as we propose shortly, it cannot be attributed to the organic body. For that matter, it cannot be perceived by the body as an object, but a kind of "subjective body", which Michel Henry recovers from the work of Maine de Biran. For Palamas: "This hypostatic light, seen spiritually by the saints […] is an illumination immaterial and divine, a grace invisibly seen and ignorantly known. *What* [its Essence] it is, they do not pretend to know" (Palamas 1983, p.57). A

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true contemplative would never claim to have seen the essence of the Godhead. What they "know" is beyond knowledge and is best called "ignorance" (Palamas 1983, p.64).

Centred on God's philanthropy, the process of man's deification embraces apophaticism as part of its ascetic discipline of persistent conversion. The whole of the incarnate reality is expressed in the figure of the heart in which the rational and affective faculties interrelate, truly constituting the inner-life of the human person. Watchfulness in quietude (*hesychia*) of this subjective reality characterises the aim of the hesychast way of life as it seeks to delve into the divine life contained in the ensouled body. The spiritual practices of the hesychasts aim to connect with that internal dimension of corporality and illuminate this, from the inner invisibility outwards toward visible reality: "The hesychast will dispose his body in such a position, recall into the interior of the heart a power which is ever-flowing outwards through the faculty of sight" (Palamas 1983, p.57). Being in *theosis*, the intention of both mind and flesh is transformed from within. The ascetic practices and prayer that make possible spiritual progress cultivate sensations that result from the struggle to dominate the passions and engage with the permanent energy of the grace rooted in the soul, or self[2]. These "blessed" practices and the intensity of their spiritual attainment provide the concrete context for manifestations of divine action that are incomprehensible to onlookers: "it is through the mediation of [the hesychasts'] souls and bodies that God effects things supernatural, mysterious and incomprehensible to the wise of this world" (Palamas 1983, p.53).

In defining the Hellenic error as postulating the mind to be separable from the body when it comes to speculative thought, St Gregory touches on a delicate point about the transparency of philosophical insight and its logical development. Does systematic reasoning, sharpened by the dialectics on the possible meaning, result in ontology or psychological constructs? For Christos Yannaras, such conceptual entities may lead us to an "artificial certainty that arises (and is proclaimed as 'truth') when subjective desire unconsciously objectifies its goal, transforming it into the illusion of real experience" (Yannaras 2013, p.57). In the place of an ontology constitutive of the immediacy of experience, philosophy tends to produce psychological constructs and thus creates conceptual idols, be they through rigorous rational argument or the creation of fantasies about the goal of human desire. Here we recognise an expression of the Hellenic

[2] Palamas reminds us of Jesus' teaching about knowledge of God and the practices of fasting and praying: "This is why the Lord taught us in the Gospels that prayer can do great things when combined with fasting" (Palamas 1983, 49).

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error as St Gregory understood it, and a diagnosis of our civilisation and its nihilism.

At one level, St Gregory was surely addressing Barlaam's over-emphasis on pagan philosophical learning as sound preparation for the life of the spirit. In this case, the cardinal virtues, as taught by Plato and, especially, Aristotle, would create the infrastructure for the more perfect and sanctifying theological virtues: grace would take over from nature and give us a truer notion of God than that of the hesychasts. Part of the Hellenic error consists in this ontological (and not mere methodological) distinction between grace and nature. Palamas' Orthodox position affirms the divine presence in man with no real opposition between grace and nature: salvation will restore nature to its original condition and permit a natural contemplation of God amongst created things. In this is revealed an even more crucial aspect of the Hellenic error: contrary to the distancing implied in conceptualisation, there is, in synergetic union with God, no gap or absence. God's Essence is unknowable; yet, in His uncreated energies He is never absent, though He may be wilfully ignored or may be experienced as Other—not because He is absent, but rather because He is unknowable in His Essence. The emphasis is manifestly placed on human interiority and the invisible, but the determinate reality implied in these energies affects corporal experience, i.e., "flowing outwards" from the interiority of the heart, to illuminate the visible world encountered by the intellect.

Grosso modo, such a formulation of spiritual progress typically corresponds to the three phases emphasised in Orthodox teaching: purification of the heart in regard to the passions; illumination of the *nous* in regard to the natural order; and *theologia*, effectively deifying union with the divine Logos. However, and to be fair to Barlaam, the crux of the matter lies in the "mind-out-of-body" approach fostered by pagan philosophy; this can never truly deal with validity of the hesychast experience within the philosophical presuppositions with which he worked. Henry's more contemporary philosophical idiom, and the peculiarity of his reversed phenomenology, being very much adverse to the scholastic modes of thinking, can effectively do so.

(2) Michel Henry and the Reconfiguration of the Philosophical Task

(a) The Ontological Rehabilitation of the Invisible: Christianity's displacement of the primacy of perception.

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For Michel Henry, philosophy at its best is phenomenological philosophy. This is a conviction that puts him firmly on the grounds of the kind of thinking, inaugurated by Descartes and the preoccupation with transcendental sources of intelligibility. Irreducible to conditions external to the inner operations that constitute the human subject, this philosophical practice demonstrates a resistance to considering what appears immediately before our eyes as a trustworthy point of departure for a rigorous philosophy. The true beginning of philosophical investigation consists, rather, in a movement inwards, to an antecedent capacity, a determinant "Before", which does not fall under the gaze of perception. It is, in short, invisible.

To this conviction, Henry associates another, one derived from Christian revelation, namely, Christianity's postulation of an active antecedent and invisible source of intelligibility for the human mind. This, he conjectures, might very well constitute a decisive influence on the adoption of a transcendental stance by modern philosophers:

> "[…] philosophical thought is […] capable of protesting against the temptation of common sense, which situates all reality in the visible world. In Descartes' cogito for example, in Kant's or Husserl's 'transcendental I', or even in the soul of the tradition, this reality is well and truly consigned to the realm of the invisible. One may say that these philosophical concepts themselves obey an inspiration of Christian origin. It makes no difference: with the development of philosophy, it is humans themselves, in an effort of thought which is specific to them, who manage to unblock illusions of naïve objectivism or materialism, in order to understand themselves in truth" (Henry 2012, 26).

In spite of his marked differences with the authors mentioned in this passage, as he demonstrates over the course of his writings, he shares their philosophical mission to resist "the temptation of common sense". By his expression "with the development of philosophy", Henry means that, especially in its modern forms, philosophy undergoes a dramatic alteration. This alteration is one that Henry will take to its ultimate consequences in the form of "the task of true philosophy", namely, the immanent organisation of conceptual categories in their relational engagement with the exteriority of transcendent givens.

Henry's way of dealing with the immanent/transcendent dichotomy is to treat it as reflecting the human condition, marked by ambivalence and a concomitant experience of "double appearing". He affirms an affective invisible interiority that appears in its radical originality as life itself. The perceived visible order appears, as if in a derivative order, as "world" and

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external to life effectively and primarily experienced in its *pathos*. Under the influence of life unceasingly given, the living self feels alive without the least interior distancing from its ontological base, equated to the power of life in its absoluteness. Such is the focus of Henry's reversed phenomenology, bringing it into line with an Orthodox understanding of *apophasis*.

What is being reversed is the dominant tendency in philosophy to emphasise the world as the transcendent source of meaning, intelligibility and, indeed, even life. This may equally be the case for more "classical" forms of phenomenology:

> "[The fixation on the primacy of perception] corrupts the whole of Western philosophy before even coming to phenomenology as such" (Henry 2000, p.49).
>
> [The crisis of phenomenology found in Husserl] has its origin in Greece. Thus, it crosses the whole of the development of Western philosophy before determining phenomenology itself" (Henry 2000, p.55).

In effect, phenomenality and *Logos* are the same thing for Greek pagan philosophy, for both are contemplated as the world and evaluated as form, i.e., the idea, giving shape to matter and establishing the aim of philosophical reflection. We are, thereby, left with a model for developing philosophical argument that has significantly affected the historical Church in the West, much in the way suggested by Florovsky in regard to Scholasticism. What is missing in this philosophical positioning is the more biblically inspired mode of conceiving *Logos* as advanced by Christianity. The Christian sense of *Logos* proposes, "[…] a definition of man that is entirely new, unknown equally in Greece and in modernity: the definition of a man at once carnal and invisible—invisible in being carnal" (Henry 2000, pp.27-28). The implication of the paradox that sees humankind as both flesh and invisibility alludes manifestly to the Incarnate Word, but also to the real ambivalence of the human condition that it illuminates:

> "The opposition of the visible to the invisible, which is taken up again and formulated in the Christian creed, has decisively philosophical import. […] The analysis of the human body has established that the body is given to us in two different fashions: on the one hand, under the form of external, visible body in the fashion of other bodies in the universe; on the other, each person lives inwardly in his or her own body under the form of the invisible flesh, suffering and desiring, and is at one with it" (Henry 2012, p.17).

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Any attempt to recover the dimensions of life's original revelatory power entails re-qualifying the standard immanent/transcendent opposition in terms of that which distinguishes the visible from the invisible. If indeed Life is first held as primary self-giving, it is not that towards which the human subject yearns ecstatically, as if going out of its self to an imagined beyond, figured as an external transcendence. Rather, the self, the *ipse*, inheres immanently and invisibly in Life. This goes contrary to the usual exercise of philosophical imagination, but that is because it has been determined by the prejudice related to the primacy of perception, i.e., the epistemic valorisation of that which appears to vision.

Laboured upon since his early *Essence of Manifestation* and developed in a series of intermediate works, Henry finally acknowledges the substance of his principal discoveries about embodied human subjectivity, as already anticipated in the conceptual creativity of those "great thinkers who were the Fathers of the Church" (Henry 2000, p.14); more precisely, those who had already endeavoured to use Greek concepts to express a truth that could not be more "anti-Greek", namely, the internal relation between human flesh and God, the essence of which is absolute Life:

> "For the Fathers, the Christian God is indeed not the Greek god. In spite of not being able to think otherwise than in Greek, they experienced the self-donating reality of God as a living reality that they suffered but from which they drew the immense joy in the very life being lived *qua* donation" (Henry 2000, p.175).

Immanence, in its invisibility, is the medium of visible corporality, including transcendence. The experience of immanence constitutes the formative experience of the self-donating God. Seeing the invisible is tantamount to discerning in visible corporeality a language of effort and movement that communicates the *pathos* of someone's flesh, someone's Ego, integrated into a corporeality that is invisible. It is, thus, that ultimately the kenotic movement of divine action connotes effort and *pathos* from which human action takes its potential for affirming a (literally) *given* identity.

(b) Following the course of the Christian Cogito: the mind through the flesh.

In Henry's view, Descartes put philosophy on a revolutionary track, but it is Maine de Biran's accomplishment to have put it on a truer one by associating the *Ego cogito* with bodily movement and resistance.

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Maine de Biran's discovery carries with it the consequence of evaluating human ipseity in dynamic and affective terms. The thinking Ego is fundamentally active, with a power translatable as a capability, as *I can*. *Qua* capability and affectivity, it retains its apodictic and transcendental status conceived now as a constitutive instance of a "subjective body", invisible and ontological *conditio qua non* for the body seen from the exterior:

> "The 'transcendental' body is transcendental because it is the condition for the mundane body, the body that is felt. […] A subject-body [must be seen as] over against an object-body and as its condition. A 'subjective body' *a priori* different from the objective body in that it appears as its foundation. […] It is for this original and founding body that a theory is, before all else, required" (Henry 2000, p.159).

At one level, Maine de Biran's corrective critique of Cartesianism holds the promise of substantiating Henry's convictions about the invisible immanence of flesh as it relates to life. But, it likewise speaks to the phenomenality of the begotten Word made flesh and whose words address the human heart. To the degree that Cartesian demands of indubitability are still in question, so matters pertaining to the Incarnate Word and the heart also need to be dealt with in the same spirit.

The centre of Henry's position in this regard is based on the affirmative quality of subjective experience in opposition to the contingent and contentious character of referentiality that seeks an anchor for truth in the world. Ambivalence appears in what we conceive as rationality. We may seek to argue for the best account of happening open to view. Or we may proceed to trust in another kind of rationality operative under the sign of paradox, "another Logos that, in order to run counter to everything humans say or think of themselves reaches at the core of their being" (Henry 2000, pp.24-25). The effects of this Logos are truly known as affective experiences of life in its prescience, i.e., in life's revealing of itself.

Considered in its immanence and original appearing, the coming into the world as a living human being is a coming in "impressional" flesh, i.e., in the state of *pathos.* The flesh is marked by a particular kind of passive suffering, but also an accompanying joy that comes with its implicit affirmation of life. The proximity of Life to the flesh is absolute; it cannot cast itself outside itself, for Life, or the living God, embraces what it begets. The ontology that it represents is one of positive, affirming, impressional presence that, once admitted, is frankly disruptive to all that an essentially paganised philosophy has wrought:

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> "From the philosophical point of view, the definition of humans as deriving their reality from the Affectivity of life, and thus as living beings who do not cease to experience themselves in suffering or in joy, has revolutionary import. […I]t shatters the horizon of Greek thought which defined the human as a rational being; humans are distinguished from animals precisely through Reason, as being 'endowed with Logos'" (Henry 2000, p.13).

Thus, seen in its fullest depth, the suffering in the individual relates immediately to the "hidden process in which life arrives originally in its primitive suffering, in the Arch-Flesh and Arch-Pathos of its Arch-Revelation" (Henry 2000, p.187), all of which refer to the Incarnate Word and His Passion: all suffering of the living relates to it as its true measure.

It is to Saint Ireneaus that Henry attributes the first sustained argument about the reality of "pathetic" flesh as related to suffering, i.e., to the phenomenological material of life at once in direct opposition to the Greek notion of *bios* and in view of deification. The underlying question is how the flesh can receive life, even godly life. The flesh of the Word comes from the Word Himself—as a Life experiencing itself in its pure phenomenological material and pathos. This becomes the condition for all flesh that receives its reality from it and also its own capacity to act bodily in its manifest operations. On this basis, Henry establishes what he calls the Christian *cogito*:

> "[T]he interpretation of the flesh [bears] ineluctably in itself an Arch-Intelligibility, that of Life in which it is given to itself, in which it is made flesh. There is no flesh that is not self-affirming and self-legitimising in regard to its existence through that by which it is flesh, or rather, living flesh, carrying in itself Life, this Arch-Intelligibility that provides an unshakeable foundation" (Henry 2000, p.193).

Corresponding to the idea of indubitability, the Arch-Intelligibility of Life, identified with the divine *Logos*, communicates from within the flesh of Life. Certainty obtains, thus, a new criterion because the "flesh cannot ever lie" and the fullness of Absolute Life, its Parousia, can be postulated as operative in the Arch-Flesh of the Arch-Son[3].

The words of revelation that come from Christ and inhere in His being as the Word cannot deceive and cannot mislead. What they reveal calls for a safeguarding of the truth from distortion and that is why they

[3] For a more complete treatment of this theme, see "Michel Henry's Idea of a *Christian Cogito*", in *Revue Roumaine de Philosophie* Tome 60, Decembre-Juillet, 2016, pp.177-190.

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have to be heard and believed in a different way than those that involve the world: less anticipated in a formulated discourse and more received on trust, more a seeing of the visible through the invisible. Yet, human beings can, and chronically do, move out of this original condition, but how this happens remains a mystery for a philosophy fixed on the priority of perception. It cannot be "seen" but felt and accommodated. Philosophers may grant self-imputation as a basis for speaking about one's self as a "me" in the accusative case and as an "I" in the nominative. But, philosophers cannot make sense of how these instances relate if they do not recognise the antecedence of the dimensions of transcendentality and the implicit priority of the invisible. Here, it is the source of communication that becomes the issue. In order to give these instances their true consistency, an inward move must be made toward Life as first appearing and as the proper ontology for questions related to personhood:

> "Of this singular me that I am, that each person is found to be, the only knowledge humanity possesses does not in fact derive from itself. It is not man who knows that he is a me, nor in general what a me is; it is not a man who knows what makes him a man. This knowledge is possessed by Life and Life alone. On the plane of thought, it is paradoxically Christianity that brings it" (Henry 2002, p.134).

Christianity involves a revelation precisely because it tells us about ourselves and gives rise to a different mode of thinking: as human persons, our origin is not the world, but grounded and generated by Life in its transcendental, all-encompassing reality. As human persons, we are not so much created as begotten: "This is Christianity's thesis about man: a man is only a man insofar as he is a Son, a Son of Life, that is, of God" (Henry 2002, p.134). The process of self-discovery of our singularity gains in consistency to the degree that we turn our attention to the peculiarity of this Absolute Life and the Arch-Ipseity that reveals at once our divine source and the affiliation to which we are called.

The Life that characterises subjective immanence and affects the "me" does not translate into a rational exercise endeavouring to trace the way to God and, most especially, when salvation is at issue. The Beatitude that is possible cannot escape its *pathos*: not "a mediated rational approach" but an "affective fusion with divine life" (Henry 2002, p.154) that only a radical phenomenology can trace. It involves the flesh of someone—that of "me" that cannot be separated from its self and, by consequence, the Arch-Ipseity: there is no life without the First Self, experiencing itself as living and eventually in terms of Arch-Flesh—the Before-the-Flesh. Faith is the certitude of this Life, understood affectively

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and revealed in its phenomenality and in its showing: "Access to the living God—access to Life—occurs only in Life, in the eternal process of its self-generation as self-revelation" (Henry 2002, p.157). Not so much a matter of knowledge, it is primarily one of access found in the trusting of Life as an unceasing gift.

If we are to speak of knowledge, then it would be more akin to the biblical kind: an intimate union within the economy of life and its *pathos*. It is a knowledge that remains such to the extent that it rests inseparably within Life, the Absolute Before, and the prior condition of the living: "Any becoming that can happen to him presupposes within the living that Absolute Before, to which this becoming ultimately returns" (Henry 2002, pp.163-64). The non-ecstatic inherence in the Life of the Arch-flesh constitutes an experiential opening to the birth of the "me" in the self-generation of Absolute Life in its *Logos*; it is its beginning as an *ipse* that has been given as that which is most certain. As in the "me" that takes its substance from Life's ipseity, impressional and affective flesh comes from the impressional and affective *pathos* of Life and unceasingly and joyfully returns to its self: "The flesh is precisely the way life makes itself Life" (Henry 2000, p.174). Our flesh that has been generated, the one that we actually have in suffering and joy, reflects the way our transcendental Self produces in us our given "me" and "ego". It is the process of the same kind of generation in Life: as our transcendental self derives from the Arch-Self, i.e., the Word, of Absolute Life, our very flesh derives from the Arch-Flesh, i.e., the Word.

Concluding reflections

Barlaam and the theological culture that he represents constituted a primary motive for Gregory Palamas' advocacy of the doctrine of *theosis* and, thereby, the Orthodox tradition as he received it. His response can be summarily described as incorporating the Spirit-centred practices of the hesychasts into the Christo-centric doctrine that dominated the teachings of the Greek Fathers. That is, he furthered the distinction between Essence and uncreated energies that he inherited from his tradition, while, guided by the Transfiguration's revelation of the fullness of Christ's incarnate reality, he underscored the effective communication of uncreated energies unto the life of the body. The uncreated light made manifest on Mount Tabor represents the most exalted and mystical form of man's divining of union with God. For his part, Henry's involvement with the specific ontology that came with the Incarnation does not derive from an explicit desire to defend a version of the Christian faith that conforms to a patristic

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mode of understanding. Nevertheless, as we have hoped to show, he comes close to it, ironically, through the modern means of transcendental philosophy. In any event, according to his own confession, he attributes the raising of the questions that set him in that direction to an epiphanic moment experienced in the French Resistance:

> "The experience of the Resistance and the maquis had a profound influence on my conception of life. The clandestinity gave me daily a keen (*aigue*) sense of the incognito. During this period we had to dissimulate what we thought and, even more so, what we did. Thanks to this permanent hypocrisy, the essence of truth revealed itself to me, that it is invisible. In the worst of moments when the world appeared atrocious, I experienced it in me as a secret to protect and that would protect me. A manifestation more profound and ancient than the world would determine our human condition"[4].

The way that he would deal with the "essence of truth that is invisible", a secret that protects but needs protection, lies in phenomenology, the only approach capable of bringing to the fore the original process of appearing, "more profound and ancient than the world", determinate of who we are. As we have seen above, the primacy of perception, i.e., of the world, which still reigned in Husserl's and Heidegger's expressions, could not appreciate the experience of the eternal. Such an experience stands in contrast to the seeming inevitability of dissimulation and hypocrisy in mundane concerns. A reversed, or radical, phenomenology was his response. But, he recognised that the achievement of that project could only be in the Christian experience of God, or of Absolute Life, revealed in the Incarnate Word. It is at this point that Henry's rigorous rendering of this experience brings him close to Palamas and his critique of the Hellenic error. Simply put, in spite of the seven centuries that separate their respective intellectual work, a common recognition of the consequences of Christian revelation for philosophy joins them together.

Palamas' circumstantial criticism of Barlaam, and the latter's claims about Greek philosophy, touch on the question of divine knowledge. Between what the hesychasts know by experience and what philosophical theologians think they know lies a very deep ditch indeed: no conceptual representation can do it justice, nor can it substitute Scripture and the

[4] Cited by Paul Audi in his *Michel Henry: Une trajectoire philosophique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006, p.29). The passage is taken from "Indications biographiques. Entretien avec Roland Vaschalde", in *Michel Henry, l'épreuve de la vie*, Actes du Colloque de Cerisy, 1996. All translations of passages taken from the French publications cited in this essay are my responsibility.

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accumulated experience and witness of the saints as a measure of its degree of veracity. But, as we have underscored, the specific reference to making the mind go out of the body and the subsequent use of the snake simile played a crucial role in the explanation of the problem. Philosophical labour, marked by pride and imaginative speculation, ignores the need for disciplining the passions and acquiring a measure of spiritual health; this would be the condition for seeing the world aright. Interiority matters, but it will always involve corporeality. What Palamas recognised in the Hellenic error, Henry articulated more precisely as philosophy's fixation on perception, even in regard to subjective states. The intrinsic and immediate bond with Life shifts dramatically the understanding of ontology: it is alive, active, and powerful. In relation to this, Henry often expressed his appreciation of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. But, what Henry takes forward is Life as self-donation and communication; as begetting an ipseity that cannot but be felt affectively. Whilst Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were on to something crucial for philosophy, they could not avoid the temptation to represent the cosmic Will that undergirds all with mental constructs. However, Absolute Life (like Divine Essence) cannot be represented, but, yes, revealed and experienced (like the uncreated energies) in bodily life. The writings of the New Testament are truly read only when read as divine communication about who we are and the way we may be restored to divine filiation through Christ, the Arch-Ipseity. To conceive the ontological as Absolute Life necessarily alters how we consider immanence and transcendence. We believe that the resituating of these categories possibly constitutes one of Henry's most significant contributions to contemporary thought and may be useful for a renewed understanding of the hesychastic experience. It is usually the case that religious thought seeks to affirm transcendence as a necessary ingredient to justify God as necessary for a sound worldview. However, what the hesychasts experience as that which is brought about by the uncreated energies may be described in Henryan terms as that which supports the advance of self-transcendence *within* the immanence of Absolute Life. Consonant with the effects of noetic prayer, it reflects the bringing of the *nous* into the heart being illumined. Divine power is an unceasing communication of gift, of energy coming from above, from Absolute Life, affecting our selves and enabling the Ego with a capacity to think and act.

Henry associates *ekstasis* and analogy with the ontology that he rejects based on concepts that map the shape of the world, or what is revealed exteriorly. However, both terms can legitimately be conceived as part of self-transcendence in life where the Ego engages in kenotic synergy with the kenotic God, who is ever self-donating. Ontological participation

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is here a matter of love, producing an ecstatic yearning for the Absolute that works its way out from within the ensouled body. It proceeds gradually, analogically, with *askesis*, but in reality, i.e., ontologically, it is not invented; it is lived in synergy with the source of Life. Moreover, its alterity is assured as an ipseity that becomes more like itself as it engages with the Arch-Ipseity.

The wisdom that motivated Saint Gregory's defence of the hesychasts, augmented by Michel Henry's unique phenomenological approach to "first appearing" as the affective experience of Life, can serve as a corrective to much of contemporary philosophy's assumption of nihilism. Above all, it preserves the dignity and full dimension of the human experience of immanence. For its part, nihilism is simply the conviction that one can make nothing—that which I will—into something (Cunningham 1996, p.10). It is, in that sense, a simulacrum of divine creation *ex nihilo*. The distinguishing feature between them is that the "real thing" is the source of life and the promise of more. As a subspecies of idolatry, nihilism's creations are of the human will acting autonomously, i.e., not in synergy with the divine will and ultimately a dead end. It remains, nevertheless, true that the power to make something out of nothing is God-given. Such freedom is consecrated in Orthodox doctrine and strongly affirmed by Henry: the Ego may turn towards that through which it is begotten and from which its capacities come; or it may turn away from it in (perhaps) wilful forgetfulness, in a kind of declaration of autonomy in favour of an ideal of unceasing self-creation. But, Henry also makes it clear how much ambivalence is inscribed in the human species, simultaneously an invisible interiority and a visible exteriority, and how much the decision comes into play as to what will become our ontological possibilities and in what direction we are to apply our efforts. Finally, we are still faced, and forever will be faced, with the most primordial and most pertinent of questions: to become gods without God, or with Him? This in itself presents the hesychastic commitment to *theosis* as the most consequent and maximal expression of one of these possibilities.

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